

Resource Conservation District is grateful for its native garden volunteers, Mariposa Weekly Gazette

CONTRIBUTED BY KRIS RANDAL, MARIPOSA COUNTY RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Since August, when the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) notified the Mariposa County Resource Conservation District (MCRCD) that the suspension of funding for Proposition 84 projects had been lifted, rapid changes have occurred at the MCRCD's Sierra Nevada Foothills Native Plant Demonstration Garden at the Mariposa County Fairgrounds.

One reason for the rush is that the best time to place native plants into the ground is in the fall, when days are still warm and nights aren't too cold. This timing allows plants to get established, as the roots expand to deeper soil levels before the searing heat of summer arrives.

The groundwork that needed to be accomplished before planting could be done was long, involved and technical. Not only was the project behind schedule because the California state budget crisis had frozen the garden project, but the impending real freeze of winter could prevent planting if the groundwork weren't done first and quickly.

Even though the project had lost some of its initial momentum, it didn't take long for dedicated volunteers to return to the garden. During this phase, consistent volunteers have included Dee- Dee Combes, Don Fox, Glenn Franklin, Gary Friesen, Joel Friesen, Jeff Gabe, Janette Gamble, Ruth Ketvertis, Len McKenzie and Jim Spotts. Julie Dowsing and Iggy Ketvirtis and newcomers Meg Keoppen and Vivian White occasionally joined the project.

On almost every Saturday of scheduled work, the MCRCD could look forward to a lot of hard physical labor contributed by the Mariposa County Probation Department's adult work crew overseen by Kathy Wallis, as well as the juvenile probation crew headed by Bill Nance. This win-win commitment has met both the probation workers' obligation to fulfill community service and the need for volunteers at the garden.

For the last few months the volunteers have been eradicating weeds, creating soil mounds, developing proper drainages, digging irrigation trenches and painstakingly leveling the pathway to comply with accessibility standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Under the guidance of retired Yosemite National Park landscape architect and ADA specialist Fox, Spotts and Gary Friesen have toiled many hours to attain the proper grade for the pathway. Jim, a licensed contractor, used his transect to get the lay of the land and donated weeks of his time tackling the challenges of ADA compliance issues. He also donated a clay culvert for the drainage crossing he helped develop.

Gary Friesen, a busy commercial pilot, spent many hours during his times at home measuring and constructing the footpath, using his digital level to establish the proper percentage of grade needed for ADA compliance. He also manned a rented rototiller and used his tractor to prep the garden site.

Fox not only gave instruction about accessibility requirements, but he also rolled up his sleeves and energetically attacked the rocky clay soil with pick and shovel. Gabe and Gamble were regulars at the site, also picking, shoveling and raking the soil to the required grade.

Next came the placement of the edging that had to be located at the correct grade level for the pathway. Much measuring and readjusting of the edging occurred. It took many days of dedicated effort by our consistent volunteers to finish the edging and prepare the landscape for the final goal of planting.

Certified arborist and past manager of the Santa Maria Parks and Recreation Department Franklin took time from his busy schedule to design and install the drainage and irrigation systems.

On Nov. 21, there were two donors and 17 volunteers to help plant, make wire gopher baskets, spread out weed-barrier cloth and apply mulch.

Two new volunteers, Kris Casto and Dan Horner, both from the Rotary Club, as well as the usual dedicated volunteers participated in this phase of the project.

Franklin demonstrated proper planting and gopher basket-making techniques, while Pat made sure that all participants signed in. Alison, who donated many local and unusual native plants, helped with the planting plan. These four volunteers made especially helpful contributions.

Bob Evans of Evans Tree Service arrived to place the boulders, which he had delivered a few days earlier, with his huge crane. The boulders not only add a natural look to the garden, but also enhance wildlife habitat.

Also participating was Pat Conlisk, a stonemason who built a retaining wall with large rocks that he donated for one of the planting mounds. Conlisk is well known for his artistic masonry skills and his innovative creations of unusual brick or stone patios, rock walls, fireplaces and houses.

On Sunday, the Chrysalis Institute poured a papercrete retaining wall around the circular “pollinator” planting mound in the center of the garden. Kevin Bowman, Donovan Peterson and Pierce Peterson worked together to create the round, foot-high wall, while Christy Peterson and Trudy Williams provided assistance. Painting the wall will come next, and the plants will be added as the finishing touch. While the Chrysalis Institute has built storage buildings and the broad-jump runway at the Mariposa County High School’s track and field facility, this is its first papercrete retaining wall.

Also on Sunday, Cindy Brooks and Larry Ends of The Homestead bed and breakfast in Ahwahnee donated their time to create a dryearth rock wall along part of the Native American planting mound. Ends had built many natural retaining walls at The Homestead, its clay soil and rocky materials similar to the garden’s site. This example will demonstrate what landowners can do with excess rocks from their own properties.

By the end of the day, 100 plants had been installed in the native plant demonstration garden. However, about 150 more natives as well as 28 bunch grasses remain to be planted, necessitating additional days of planting.

The next planting day will be Saturday, Dec. 5, starting at 9 a.m. Anyone who would like to help and learn about the plants in the process, can join the group at 5039 Fairgrounds Road, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy

offices. Participants should wear long sleeves and bring gloves, hats and shovels or other planting tools, as well as water and lunch.

For more information, contact project manager Kris Randal at the MCRCDD office at 966-3431 or send emails to kris.randal@ca.usda.gov